

Islam

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It will occasion no surprise that in the Islamic countries there appear to be close parallels to almost all the beliefs and practices described in this volume as manifest in other civilisations in past ages or at this present time of ours. Islam is rooted in the ancient culture of Arabia, which partakes with other Semitic cultures in a common heritage, so that much that is Arabian is also to be found in the civilisation of the Hebrews, Mesopotamians and other Semitic communities. In the extensive territories where Islam became the dominant religion – Africa, Persia, parts of the Indian sub-continent, Indonesia, etc. – numerous pre-Islamic religious beliefs and practices survive, and even flourish vigorously, whether adapted into Islam or, not infrequently, without pretence of an Islamic veneer. In the latter case they are condemned by the ulema (doctors of theology) even if they be powerless to eradicate them. It is less well known that many vestiges of pre-Islamic pagan religion are still to be found in the Arabian Peninsula itself. In its formative period Islam developed into the distinctive religious culture, more or less as we now know it, exposed to the influences of the Mediterranean world of Greece and Rome, and of converts to the faith from Christianity, Judaism, Iranian religions and others.

Most of this is common knowledge.

From the wealth of evidence of divination by various methods, omens, even certain forms of oracle – whether these exist at a high intellectual level or belong to the everyday

life of ordinary folk – it is only possible here to select some limited examples by way of illustration. For a thorough systematic study the reader is referred to Taufic Fahd's excellent book, *La divination arabe. Études religieuses sociologiques et folkloriques sur le milieu natif de l'Islam* (Leiden, 1966), upon which this chapter has liberally drawn. To distinguish between diviner and prophet is not easy and the distinctive line between divination and magic is uncertain. Islam being an Arabian religion, it is logical to start with divination and oracles known from the preceding pagan age, the *Jāhiliyyah* as the Arabs call it, and trace where these have survived on into Islam, or the Islamic era, itself.

In the Ka'bah of Mecca, an idol, said to have been brought from Hit in Iraq, and known to the pagan Meccans as Hubal, was set up in front of a well or pit inside the actual building. Before this god Hubal lay seven arrows known by the technical name *qidh*, a word also used of the arrows in the gambling game called *maysar*. On each arrow was something written; one arrow had written on it 'blood-money', and when two parties were at variance as to the person who should take the responsibility for paying it, the custodian, known as *sādin*, shuffled the arrows for them; the individual whose lot was to draw this arrow assumed the duty of payment. Another arrow had written on it, 'Yes', and, when they required an answer about some affair, if the arrow marked 'Yes' fell to their lot they acted in accordance with it. Another had 'No' and when they wanted to do something they shuffled it among the arrows, and if it fell to their lot they did not do that thing.

Another arrow had written on it, 'Belongs to you' or, as another version has it, 'Of pure descent', while another had 'Attached', and yet a third had 'Belonging to others, not to yourselves.' This was used to determine paternity in a disputed case. Affiliation is still an important issue among Arab tribes because of the responsibility of relatives for blood-money and blood revenge; furthermore, in parts of Arabia there is a custom current among the tribes of providing a woman concubine for the guest, and of course there is the case of plain fornication. Only some thirty to forty miles from Aden I came across a sort of oracle in 'the Bastard's Rock'. If an accusation of illegitimacy is made, the child of

suspect legitimacy – always, I imagine, a boy – is made to crawl under a great square rock poised on stones with a small space between it and the ground, a natural phenomenon. If the child gets through he is legitimate. I was told of a case where a boy stuck under the rock and his mother burst into a fury of rage because he had unjustly impugned her honour! The mediaeval writer Usāmah ibn Munqidh tells of a rock-cleft at Petra which was used in the same way.

Another account of this type of oracle runs as follows:

An arrow had written upon it 'Waters' and when they wanted to dig for water they shuffled the arrows with that one among them, and they acted in accordance with wherever it came out. They used, when they wished to circumcise a lad, to give a woman in marriage, to bury a deceased person, or, if they doubted the ancestry of a person, to take him to Hubal along with 100 dirhams (silver drachmae) and a slaughter-camel which they would give to the man in charge of the arrows who shuffles them. Then they would bring up their man about whom they wished to ascertain – whatever it was. 'O God of ours', they would say, 'this is so and so, about whom we want to know such and such a thing. Produce the truth about him.' They would then say to the man in charge of the arrows, 'Shuffle' (literally, 'Strike!'). If 'Belongs to you' came out, he was a *wasīl*, of good quality as far as the tribe was concerned. If 'Belonging to others' came out he was an ally (*ḥalīf*); and if 'Attached' came out he was linked to them because of residing among them, but without any relationship or pact of alliance. If 'No' came out they would postpone an action for that year, until they decided to come for a second time, and they would go on with this affair of theirs until the arrows produced a positive answer. An ancient pre-Islamic verse runs:

Inna 'khtalafnā fa-habī 'ṣ-ṣirāḥā
Thalātat-an yā Hubalu fiṣāḥā
Al-maytu wa-'l-udhratu wa-'n-nikāḥā,
Wa-'l-bur' fi 'l-mardā wa-'ṣ-ṣiḥāḥā.
In lam taqul-hu fa-muri 'l-qidāḥā.

When we are in dispute, give us rest
In three things, o Hubal, a clear (verdict),
The dead, circumcision and marriage,

Recovery for the sick and sound health.

If you do not utter it [i.e., make a sign] – command the arrows (to do so).

These verses quite evidently represent authentically how and why the pre-Islamic Arabians sought oracles from the gods of paganism, and I am inclined to regard the verses themselves as actually pre-Islamic. The pre-Islamic south Arabian inscriptions confirm the practice, in that in one there is a question (*ms'l*) posed to the god Ilumqah, while another god, Ta'lab, gives an indication of his wish by a sign.

Settling by lot, called *istiqsām* – which of course is what resort to divination by the arrows is – is condemned by the Qur'ān, yet, in affairs more or less mundane, the Prophet himself did sometimes make a decision by lot. In ancient Israel this was also practised and the technical term employed comes from the same root as the Arabic *istiqsām*.

Arab tribesmen today occasionally treat their local saints, whose shrines have taken the place of those of the pre-Islamic gods, to demands couched in somewhat peremptory language. So also did the celebrated prince of ancient Arabian poets, Imru'u 'l-Qays. Sworn to avenge the slaying of his father Ḥujr, he paid a visit to the oracle of Dhu 'l-Khalaṣah, north of Najrān, on the present-day Sa'udi-North Yemen border, and consulted the god in the ordinary way by drawing from three arrows entitled 'The Commanding', 'The Prohibiting' and 'The Waiting'. Drawing the second, he broke the arrows in his anger and dashed them in the face of the idol, exclaiming with a coarse imprecation, 'If *your* father had been slain you would not have hindered me.'

In ancient and contemporary Arabia the most important political function is that of arbitration between two contending parties. One of Muhammad's chief preoccupations indeed at Medina was to enforce compliance with the agreement he had made with the tribes there constituting him the ultimate arbiter in disputes. Until that time one of the several ways of settling a dispute was for the two parties to a quarrel to go to a *kāhin* who settled cases by divinatory or magic procedures. It need hardly be pointed out that *kāhin* is the same word as Hebrew *cohen*, both deriving from

the common Semitic civilisation, but *kāhin* perhaps represented the function at a less developed and sophisticated stage than the Biblical *cohen*. The Arabian *kāhins* pronounced their decisions in rhymed prose of lofty style and cryptic oracular diction; this was nevertheless no mere exercise in rhetoric, for their utterances clothed verdicts concluded with professional forensic skill.

An office parallel to that of the *kāhin*, the *Ṭāghūt*, is alluded to in the Qur'ān eight times. The Believers were prohibited from seeking judgment from the *Ṭāghūt*, but must refer their differences to Allah and His Apostle. The term survives in the northern Yemen, meaning the head of a tribe who judges by customary law. I have not heard that the *Ṭāghūt* relies on oracular methods, but in some places, even today, recourse is had to supernatural means to determine a case, as will be mentioned. The ancient *Ṭāghūt* judge was called a *shayṭān* (lit. Satan) or a magician (*sāḥir*) because of his association with a familiar spirit. The Medina Jews seem to have fitted into the system, for the Aslamī *kāhin*, Abū Burdah, was invited by the Jewish Naḍīr and Qurayzah tribes to judge between them, and the half-Jewish Ka'b ibn al-Ashraf is identified with the *Ṭāghūt*. That the *Ṭāghūt* was associated with ancient Arabian religion is apparent in the description of the *Tawāghūt* as 'interpreters of the idols, speaking with the people with their tongues.' 'There was one in every tribe, upon whom the *shayṭāns* were caused to descend.'

North Arabians might repair to a *kāhin* at the north Yemen city of Ṣa'dah. A noble Quraysh lady was accused of adultery by her husband and sent back to her father. To exonerate herself she took the oath that she was innocent and volunteered to go to one of the Yemen *kāhins* to put the matter to test. When, however, she and her father had nearly arrived she began to show some disquiet so he asked her if this was because she had done some unseemly thing. This the lady denied. 'But I know,' she said, 'that you are coming to a human being who both makes errors and hits the mark, and I cannot be sure that he will not mark me with a brand-mark (or, possibly, branding iron) which will be a disgrace until the Day of Judgment.'

This appears a clear allusion to trial by ordeal, known in

Arabia today as *bish'ah*, and the only classical reference to it of which I am aware. It is found in our time at Bir Sheba in southern Palestine, in Jordan, in Ḥaḍramawt and in Yāfi'ī country on the Yemen border. The best known *bish'ah* is to heat a knife red-hot; with this the *mubashshi'* (arbiter) flicks the tip of the tongue of the accused; if it burns his tongue, this proves him guilty. I discussed *bish'ah* with a shaykh of the Āl 'Abd al-Wadūd, the *mubashshi'*-judge of Raydat 'Abd al-Wadūd on the east Ḥaḍramawt coast. He emphasized that the professional *mubashshi'* – the function is hereditary in families – would spend a long time discussing with the litigants, painting a fearful picture of the red-hot knife and trying to bring them to agree to a settlement. An interesting aside is that he kept on saying that he had 'broken' the knife and when I persisted in asking to see even the pieces, someone told me that *kasara*, 'to break', here means 'to leave off.' In the Residency files I found that the local Arab Government had abolished *bish'ah* as a heathen practice contrary to Islamic *sharī'ah* (law), but one Arab official had written a defence of it as highly effective with the tribes. My theory is that while interrogating the parties the *mubashshi'* and his family carry on private investigations as to the guilty party and manipulate the red-hot knife appropriately.

When, in ancient times, contestants selected a *kāhin* to arbitrate between them they first tested his powers by asking him to guess at a certain object they had picked up on their way to him. To this the *kāhin* or *Ṭāghūt* would reply with high-sounding oaths, identifying it. In the case of the Qudā'ah *kāhin* whose familiar or *shayṭān* was called 'Uzzā the two parties picked up a dead vulture which they concealed for him to guess. His answer typifies the rhetoric of the *kāhins*.

You have concealed for me the owner of a wing with a long neck, lengthy of leg, black mixed with white, when it hastens it soars and circles in its flight, when it swoops from the height of the sky it splits (its prey) from end to end, owner of a keen-pointed claw, living until worn out. . . . I swear by the light and the moon, thunder and fate, the winds and the creation, you have concealed for me a

vulture's corpse in a saddle-cloth of hair, with the gallant lad of Banū Naṣr.

This testing of the *kāhin* was authenticated to me in a curious way, for when enquiring about trial by ordeal in Abyan in 1964, my informants told me that two parties repairing to the *mubashshi'* in Upper Yāfi', would ask him to divine the secret thing they had brought with them – for example, they said, *a locust in a leather bag*. In this same year also was published for the first time, in Ḥaydarābād, *Kitāb al-Munammaq* and to my astonishment, when reading through it, I found that two parties going to the *kāhin* of Qudā'ah some fourteen centuries ago, hid for him to divine and thereby test his confidence, the head of a locust in a water-skin (*ra's jarādah fī khurbat mazādah*).

Muhammad set himself firmly against judgment by divination and seems to have disclaimed for himself power to perform magic. He opposed magic, though on more than one occasion he recognised himself as having been bewitched. Once he was asked by a Bedouin to prove he was the Apostle of Allah, as his Companions maintained, by telling him what was in the belly of his she-camel (in the same way as *kāhins* are tested), the Bedouin meaning that he should tell him whether the foetus was male or female. His request only brought him a coarse rejoinder from the Companions.

Nevertheless Muhammad in his outward manifestations appears to us like the *kāhins*. He was an ecstatic and took omens from his dreams as they did. At the beginning his dreams anticipated real events. However he did not draw revelation from *shayṭāns* but revelations were brought to him by Gabriel. Islamic Tradition has preserved evidently genuine accounts of how revelation came to Muhammad. 'When Muhammad received a revelation... this caused him much pain, so that we perceived it.' Even on cold days sweat appeared on his forehead. He would cover his head. He snored as one asleep or rattled like a young camel. The pagan prophet al-'Anṣī in Ṣan'ā' seems to have groaned or cried out in the travail of receiving revelation as the Arab historians inform us. Ecstatic states in Arabia are associated with intense trembling or shaking and this is also found in popular forms in Sufism. However in the sources consulted

it does not seem that Muhammad is recorded as trembling.

The way in which pagan gods manifested a sign may perhaps be understood in the light of an unusual experience I had in 1940 when stationed in the Ṣubayḥī tribal area west of Aden, in a village of the most farouche tribe I have ever encountered. This district had a number of ecstasies, known as *majdhūb* or *mamlūk*, possessed, associated with a saint, al-Qādī, and his shrine. When I questioned these ecstasies about this saint one of them stated that he was of Banāt al-ʿArsh, the Daughters of the (Heavenly) Throne. I would have asked a great deal more but my more orthodox soldiers shut him up and told him this was nonsense. In fact these 'Islamic' saints function exactly as the ancient pagan tutelary deities.

We engaged some of these *majdhūbs* as tribal auxiliaries and upon an occasion one of them fell into a trance which even our regular soldiers recognised as being effected by the saint. We were at this time holding on behalf of the Lahej sultanate, several hostages from two tribal sub-sections, preparatory to judgment in an abduction case. One morning, the chief of the auxiliaries, himself a *majdhūb*, came to me, visibly distressed and trembling in every limb, with beads of sweat on his brow though it was an exceptionally cool day after the summer rains. The other *majdhūbs* present were also trembling and they knew that other *majdhūbs* with whom they had not been in contact would be trembling also. The fuss arose because our soldiers, though feeding the hostages, refused to provide them with water which was short because it had to be conveyed up the mountainside. The saint had demonstrated his displeasure at the failure to provide for hostages in their or his territory, visiting it on the *majdhūbs* and they had to discover the cause and seek to appease him.

In a northern Arabian context we seem to have a remarkable survival of pre-Islamic religion that enables us to interpret the rather bald statements of Arab genealogists and historians. These writers tell us that in such and such a section of a tribal confederation of the migratory tribes of the north lay the honour (*sharaf*) and the *bayt* – literally 'house', meaning also a 'temple' and, for Bedouin, a leather 'tent'. It is suggested that the *bayt* may have been a sort of

portable temple, but I am also inclined to associate with that the family or 'house' which had charge of it. (In southern Arabia where the population is mostly settled the *bayt* would be a building.)

Now the famous scholar Alois Musil, who lived with and studied the migrating Rwalah tribes of Syria before World War I, describes what looks like a sort of camel-litter called Abu 'd-Duhūr, meaning literally 'Father of the Ages', but the name recalls *dahr* or *Manāt*, Fate, the latter being the well-known pre-Islamic goddess. Abu 'd-Duhūr is kept in the tent of the prince and is a sign of the princely authority of its holder. When the tribe goes on warlike manoeuvres, Abu 'd-Duhūr is borne on a white camel at the head of the tribal warriors. The Rwalah believe that Allah gives signs to them through the intermediary of Abu 'd-Duhūr. At times of dead calm, the ostrich feathers with which it is adorned begin to flutter; at other times the litter moves to right or left, but suddenly straightens itself. When the feathers wave, the Rwalah believe that Allah has touched it with his power. From such movements auguries are taken and it may be surmised that the *bayt* of the migrating Bedouin of ancient times had also an oracular function as Abu 'd-Duhūr has or had at any rate in very recent times.

While on the one hand Muhammad rejected the notion that he could perform miracles and denied that he was a *kāhin* (whether or not he actually considered *kāhins* had really the power of divination) it is reported by his biographers that he did pay great attention to the omen, *fa'l*, and to his dreams as has been already mentioned. Sūrat Yūsuf of the Qur'ān approves of Joseph in interpreting dreams, and Islamic Tradition sees Muhammad as an interpreter of dreams like the Prophets preceding him. Historians indeed tell that Muhammad's mission was foretold in the dream of a king of pre-Islamic Yemen – that his country would be occupied by the Abyssinians but liberated by the Yemeni leader Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan with the aid of the Persians, and that there would arrive an Arabian Prophet.

In popular Islam, the beliefs of common folk, the tradition of presage of future events or decisions made by supernatural agency through the medium of dreams seems to be universal. It figures for instance in the hagiologies of Sudanese *fiqihs*,

the religious leaders and saints of the countryside, rather unsophisticated in type. The *fiqih* might be in a *khalwah*, i.e. the retreat of an ascetic which would also contain a school for teaching religion, or in the domed tomb, *qubbah*, of a departed saint, and be vouchsafed, when he falls asleep, a dream of guidance for his future actions. The Bān al-Naqā' are hereditary *fiqihs* of the districts north of Khartoum, and 'Abd al-Raḥmān wadd Bān al-Naqā' saw in a dream his grandfather flying between the Heavens and Earth, his own father flying behind him, and himself behind his father. He recounted this vision to Sharīf 'Abdullāh who said to him, 'They have indicated to you that you should occupy yourself with exoteric learning.' Yet another *fiqih* of this same family had the experience, while in a *khalwah*, of his soul departing his body in a dream and penetrating to the Heavens where he met the Prophet Muhammad who assigned Shamharūsh, the *cadi* of the Jinnīs, to his service, while various deceased Sudanese saints conferred on him the gifts of saintship and 'the fire of the *fiqih* Badawī.' In olden time in the Sudan fires were lighted at night so that the *fiqih* could see to study with his pupils, so that the 'fire of the *fiqih*' comes to mean his teaching circle.

The belief in familiar spirits survives into our own time and in southern Arabia it is, of all people, Muhammad's descendants, the Sayyids, who are credited with having service (*khidmah*) from the Jinnīs by even the orthodox biographical collections, as also with the power to summon (*taḥḍīr*) the Jinnīs and, one assumes, to consult them. We made the acquaintance of a Ḥaḍramī Sayyid, whose Jinnī was called Sharyūt, but his Jinnī, when willing to obey him, only performed simple tricks of white magic. It is however widely believed in the popular Islamic world that if you have a ring with the secret name of God (*khātam al-ism*), the Jinnīs will come and offer you their service.

To revert however to the question of dreams. At an early period in Islam data relating to the interpretation of dreams began to be collected, the great name associated with this activity being that of Ibn Sirīn, who flourished in the latter part of the first *hijrah* century/7th century AD. This developed into a sort of pseudo-science known in Arabic as *ta'bīr al-ru'yā*. About the beginning of the 4th/10th century AD,

the name of Artemidorus of Ephesus, and his work on dreams, starts to figure in Islamic literature, though actually the translation from Greek into Arabic took place about a century earlier. It appears to have exerted some influence on the formulation of the principles of this pseudo-science, which developed into a sort of discipline and gave rise to an extensive literature.

We are told that Ibn Sīrīn, 'When a dream was submitted to him, remained a good part of the day questioning the dreamer about his conditions, his person, his profession, his family and mode of life; in short, he neglected nothing of a kind that would supply the least indication, and he took these replies into account when pronouncing on the dream.' It will be immediately apparent that his method of ascertaining all relevant information closely resembles that of the *mubashshi'* before he puts his client to the test of the red-hot knife.

By way of contrast to Ibn Sīrīn's rather empirical approach to the interpretation of dreams let me quote from the celebrated philosopher of history, Ibn Khaldūn, in his rationalisation of dream visions. He says:

Dream vision is an awareness on the part of the rational soul in its spiritual essence, of glimpse(s) of the forms of events. While the soul is spiritual, the forms of events have actual existence in it, as is the case with all spiritual essences. The soul becomes spiritual through freeing itself from bodily matters and corporeal perceptions. This happens to the soul (in the form of) glimpse(s) through the agency of sleep. . . . Through (these glimpses) (the soul) gains the knowledge of future events that it desires and by means of which it regains the perceptions that (properly) belong to it. When this process is weak and indistinct, the soul applies to it allegory and imaginary pictures, in order to gain (the desired knowledge). Such allegory, then, necessitates interpretation.¹

'Incubation' is defined for us as sleeping in the sanctuary with the formal intention of receiving, in a dream, the reply to a question asked of the god, having performed certain prescribed rites beforehand. It appears that incubation was

practised in pre-Islamic Arabia since, in two inscriptions, thanksgiving offerings are recorded for visions revealed in the temples of 'Athtar and Awwam', while a third inscription alludes to a vision which is described as 'what he showed him in his slumber.'

Ibn Khaldūn maintains that the dream vision about things one desires may be induced. He says,

It consists of saying, upon falling asleep, and after obtaining freedom of the inner senses and finding one's way clear (*sc.* for supernatural perception), the following non-Arabic words (apparently meaningless): *Tamāghis ba'dān yaswādda waghdās nawfanā ghādis*. The person should then mention what he wants, and the thing he asks for will be shown him in his sleep. . . . With the help of these words. I have myself had remarkable dream visions, through which I learned things about myself that I wanted to know.

He rationalizes this by saying that 'The dream words produce a preparedness in the soul for a dream vision.'

The Islamic practice known as *istikhārah* is by some considered a survival of incubation. *Istikhārah* is the prayer of a person who has not yet made up his mind, in order to be inspired with a sound decision regarding an enterprise he is about to undertake. In popular practice there are many forms of this *istikhārah* not sanctioned by Tradition, among which is seeking an answer through consulting the Qur'ān. The early nineteenth century Arabist Edward Lane says that in Egypt in his day the procedure was to repeat thrice the *Fātiḥah* of the Qur'ān, the four brief verses of Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ, and the verse from Sūrat al-An'ām commencing *Wa-'inda-hu mafātīḥ al-ghayb lā ya'lamu-hā illā huwa* (With Him are the keys of the mysterious, no-one knows them but He). 'They let the book fall open, or open it at random, and from the seventh line of the right-hand page draw their answer.' This is forbidden by the Sunnī ulema but is doubtless done everywhere. In Ṣan'ā' of the Yemen in the first half of the 11th/17th century a party of notables at a banquet decided to consult the Holy Book to see whom Allah would chose as Caliph, i.e. Imām of the Yemen, and, after reciting the *Fātiḥah* and praying, the identical passage came up three times, 'Mention

in the Book Ismā'īl.' In the event Ismā'īl son of al-Qāsim the Great succeeded in the year 1054/1644, taking the title of al-Mutawakkil.

In Persian speaking circles the Sufi *Mathnawī* of Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī or the *Dīwān* of the poet Ḥāfiz are often used for the same purpose.

The means whereby presage of good or ill fortune was sought that figures perhaps most commonly in the Islamic histories is consultation of the stars. Names of astrologers or astronomers – the Arabic word *munajjim* means both – are preserved even from the pre-Islamic age; moreover a south Arabian inscription has come to light which alludes to a *kawkabān ṣ(i)dqm*, probably meaning 'a true star', in the prayer for male children of good star and fortune.

It is curious that so distinguished a scientist as al-Bīrūnī, who had spent much time and labour in studying Greek and Indian astrology and whose book on *Tanjīm*, composed in 420/1029, deals with both astronomy and astrology, should apparently have believed in the influence of the planets on the sub-lunary world and that he should even have shared the general belief in the efficacy of charms and talismans, whereas his contemporary, Avicenna, contemptuously refutes astrologers.

How general was the credence given this other pseudoscience, astrology, during the early mediaeval period can be seen from the *Qaṣīdah* of Abū Dulaf al-Khazrejī, writing, in the 4th/10th century, of tricksters and beggars, mainly in Iraq and Iran, and using the cant or argot of their professions. One of these he calls

a band of people who peer in to omens (*fa'l*), auguries (*zajr*) and the meaning of the stars. They give money to a group of onlookers on the understanding that these last should come to them and ask them about their lucky stars and about their future circumstances, so that the fortune-tellers may look into their horoscopes. The customers then give back their money to the fortune-tellers. The latter usually keep it, but they may say to another person, 'We won't take your money because your star has not come out as you would like it.'; until the dupe falls into the harvest of victims ready for slaughter.

'Al-Tanbal,' he adds, 'is the simpleton who is the victim of tricks played on him and who is taken in by the fortune-tellers' returning his money to them. So he too lays out his money, fully expecting the fortune-teller to give it back to him; but the latter takes it from him, thus making him look ridiculous.' Readers of the *Arabian Nights* may also remember *The story told by the tailor*, in which the glib barber delays his exasperated victim whilst he finds with his astrolabe the precise moment auspicious for the shaving.

Recourse to astrologers was not restricted to ordinary folk in the sūq. In the fiscal and administrative survey of the Yemen under the brilliant Rasūlid dynasty, compiled at the beginning of the 9th/15th century, is included the item, among a list of other government servants, of

the calculators of astronomical or astrological observations, experts, philosophers, who have perused the instructive books and have the reputation for sound auspicious astrological judgments and whose prognostications of propitious times to undertake a certain action coincide with auspicious movements (*sc.* of the stars, planets etc.) – what they have laid down having been (proven) sound, be it old or new. They will not leave the Royal Court (al-Bāb al-Sharīf) because of the needs of the sovereign, and the requirement of astrological observations to be made on newly-born children and the selection of (propitious) movements (of stars etc.). Even if they be two, three or four persons they are indispensable.

An accusation levelled against the late Imām Aḥmad of the Yemen who died as recently as 1962 was that he consulted astrologers whom he maintained at his court.

In fact one reads in many of the histories of professional astrologers attached to the courts of Islamic monarchs, and the following is related of the 'Abbāsīd period. The philosopher al-Kindī, at the court of the Caliph in early 3rd/9th century Baghdad, evidently practised astrology as part of his duties and equipment as a scholar. On a particular occasion his assertion of his superiority in the field of scholarship was challenged by a prominent 'ālim or professional scholar who conceded however that he would admit to this if al-Kindī

could show himself able to divine something that he, the 'ālim, would write down on a piece of paper. So they laid a wager – the 'ālim staked his valuable cloak and al-Kindī his mule with its expensive trappings. The 'ālim wrote on his piece of paper which was placed under the quilt of the Caliph. Asked to guess what he had written, al-Kindī

asked for a tray of earth, rose up, took the altitude, ascertained the Ascendant, drew an astrological figure on the tray of earth, determined the positions of the stars and located them in the signs of the Zodiac and fulfilled all the conditions of divination and thought-reading, literally, guessing the nature of a hidden object. He then pronounced that the 'ālim had written something which was 'first a plant and then an animal'.

The writing turned out to say, 'The rod of Moses' – which of course turned into a snake in front of Pharaoh!

If this story from the Persian *Chahār Maqālah* or *Four Discourses* is to be considered more entertainment than historical fact, it does nevertheless contain certain points of resemblance to the testing of the *kāhin* in an earlier age.

In many countries individuals are credited with the ability to divine or to see a robbery enacted before their eyes and describe it detail by detail to the robbed so that they are able to apprehend the thief. A cynical Aden proverb runs, *Mā fāt 'ala 'l-sāriq shall-uh al-munajjim*, 'What the thief missed the astrologer has carried off.' The astrologer's fee has been so exorbitant that the owner of the stolen goods has nothing left.

The elaborate Chinese compass illustrated on Plate 4 employed in fortune-telling is to some extent to be matched by the *zā'irajah* (fig. 11) attributed to a Moroccan scholar of Csuta about the close of the 6th/12th century. It consists of a large circle enclosing other concentric circles for the spheres, the elements, the created things, the *spiritualia*, as well as other types of beings and sciences. Each circle is divided into sections, the areas of which represent signs of the Zodiac, or the elements, or other things. The lines dividing each section run to the centre, and are called chords. Along each chord there are sets of letters that have a con-

of the Zodiac and the degree (of the sign on the horizon), so the particular chord bordering the sign of the Zodiac of that Ascendant is chosen. There then follows a most complicated set of calculations involving the numerical values of the letters of the alphabet. A very simple form of *zā'irajah* from early 19th century Egypt is shown by Edward Lane in his *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*; this is a square table containing a hundred letters, but it has nothing in common with the Moroccan *zā'irajah* other than the name. It is thought that the word itself derives from the Persian *zā'ichah*, horoscope, astronomical tables.

Augury by the flight of birds (*ḥīrah*) was condemned by the Prophet as pagan superstition, but it has survived vigorously enough among, for example, the northern Rwalah tribe. Musil reports that two ravens flying above a raiding party are a good omen, but a single raven or a vulture is a bad omen. Like the ancient Arabs the Rwalah took auguries from the movements of animals. A Rwalah Bedouin starting on an important task considered the gazelle unlucky and would shout at it, '*Gha zāl gha zāl, wa-sharr-an zāl!*' ('Gazelle, gazelle, let misfortune vanish as well!'). For the ancient Arabs, a gazelle passing from right to left was a bad omen but, in general, the movement from left to right was considered to bring misfortune, though they do not seem to have been consistent over this. The Rwalah carefully observe the fox. If, on catching sight of a Rwalah raiding party, it halts, they know they need expect no mishap but will return with booty. A white mare, ass, camel, are good omens; a black dog is a bad omen.

These then are a few of the forms in which divination is or was practised in Islamic countries or some of them. I have not dealt with geomancy or divination based on drawing lines in sand, and many other ways of telling the future. There is, to take a case in point, the large literature on *jafr*,³ which is particularly the domain of Shi'ah Muslims, its origin being attributed to 'Alī, the fourth Caliph, himself. It contains predictions, often apocalyptic, and covers all methods of divination based on letters of the alphabet and their numerical values. This category seems sometimes to be called *ḥisbān*, and it is a lasting regret to me that on my two tours of the former Wāḥidī sultanate circumstances prevented

me from consulting a manuscript *ḥisbāniyyah* in the hands of the Bā Qādir maṣṣab of the sanctuary at Ṣaʿīd, but in the Yemen in 1966 I was able to copy a poem attributed to a semi-legendary poet, al-Ḥārith al-Rayyāshī, which was said to foretell the eventual victory of the Imām al-Badr over Nasser and the Republic. The poem was an accretion of individual verses but it looked archaic; the main interest of it however is that at the present day a poet could be held to have divinatory functions just like the ancient Arabian poets with their *hājīs*, meaning muse or inspiration, who sometimes acted as oracles.

Notes

- 1 Franz Rosenthal, trans., *Ibn Khaldūn: the Muqaddimah*, Bollingen Series XLIII, New York, 1958.
- 2 A form of the Arabic numerals close to that used in the west to-day.
- 3 Said to be a book written by the sixth Shīʿah Imām containing all that was to happen until the Last Day.